



# Ecomusicology between Apocalypse and Nostalgia

## Citation

Rehding, Alexander. 2011. "Ecomusicology Between Apocalypse and Nostalgia." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64, no. 2: 409–414.

## Published Version

doi:10.1525/jams.2011.64.2.409

## Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:12712866>

## Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA>

## Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.  
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

## Ecomusicology between Apocalypse and Nostalgia

ALEXANDER REHDING

In the early 1990s, an age that was as conscious about the environment as it was thrilled about the coming millennium, a literature professor of mine pronounced that twenty-first-century literature was going to be about the environment, in the same way as twentieth-century literature had been “about” psychoanalysis. At the time this seemed like a wildly unlikely assertion, even from a professor who was not known for letting subtlety get in the way of a snappy pronouncement. But looking at the direction in which more recent literary and cultural developments are pointing, perhaps his comment was not so far off the mark.

Ecologically oriented literature occupies an ever-increasing sector of mainstream literary production. Award-winning authors such as Margaret Atwood and Ian McEwan have turned toward environmental disasters in their recent novels; Barbara Kingsolver’s writings, in a less alarmist mode, have long displayed a particular concern for ecology, community, and landscape. Among this literature, however, it is particularly eco-thrillers, widely hailed as the next generation of science-fiction stories, that have managed to capture the general public’s imagination.<sup>1</sup> Some publications, such as Frank Schätzing’s page-turner *Der Schwarm* (*The Swarm*, 2004), have managed to top the international bestsellers lists for months. To be sure, we are still waiting for the ecological Proust or James Joyce, but the twenty-first century is still in its early stages.

Hollywood has been quick to jump on the bandwagon as well, with “The Day After Tomorrow” (2004), “Wall-E” (2008), “Avatar” (2010), and notably Al Gore’s Oscar-winning documentary “An Inconvenient Truth” (2006). This active literary and cinematic production is paralleled by a vibrant movement in literary ecocriticism, which supports the undertaking with a critical discourse and furnishes a language within which to couch the critical terms of the debate. Renewed topicality can even be discovered in the old masters: in the context of ecocriticism, the curious episode on land reclamation from Goethe’s *Faust II* emerges as a harbinger of looming ecological disaster. How can such critical insights be transferred to the musical sphere? Better yet, how can tools be forged that serve the specific needs of music?

What is common to the current interest in ecological topics is a pronounced sense of acute crisis—whether expressed in the earnest urgency of Gore’s political mission or in the more sensationalist thrills of spectacular Hollywood special effects. This apocalyptic strain is far from being the only one in the environmental imagination; a second prominent strand—to which

1. For a critical appraisal of eco-thrillers, see, for instance, McKie, “Read All about the End of the World.”

we will return later—takes a more romantic line, which operates with what can broadly be understood as invocations of a sense of nostalgia. Nonetheless, commentators have given clear preference to the apocalyptic mode, hailing it as the “master metaphor” of the environmental imagination.<sup>2</sup> This orientation toward crisis makes sense, as it endows the literary products with political relevance, powerful realism, and—in a very literal sense—sublime terror. The earth needs to be saved, *right now*.

The critical issue that ecomusicology will have to wrestle with is how to implement this sense of crisis, or—if there is no adequate equivalent—what can replace it. Will this be stagings of Antoine Brumel’s *Missa Et ecce terrae moto*, Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, Britten’s *Noye’s Fludd*, or perhaps Andriessen’s *Writing to Vermeer*? It appears that the narrative arts have an obvious advantage over music in this regard. As so often, the complexities of the materiality and the modes of representation of music make it difficult to adapt the same sense of crisis to the musical sphere.

But despite these challenges, ecomusicology may represent a genuine departure from general musicological practice: while themes and methodologies are still in flux, the field derives much of its relevance and topicality from a sense of urgency and from an inherent bent toward awareness-raising, praxis (in the Marxian sense), and activism. These political aspects, to be sure, are not always followed up in practice, but they are distinguishing marks in a discipline that is often reluctant to make political commitments.<sup>3</sup> The task of the immediate future is for ecomusicology not only to hone its guiding questions, but also to work out its political leanings and define the nature of the tasks that it hopes to pursue.

In musicology, one major impulse for ecological questions has been broadly channeled via the idea of nature in the context of musical culture.<sup>4</sup> These studies have been primarily interested in the use of conceptions of nature as an epistemological or musical wellspring. The Marxist literary critic Raymond Williams reminds us of the multivalence of “nature,” a term that he famously called “perhaps the most complex word in the language.”<sup>5</sup> Following Williams, nature can relate to (1) the essential quality of something, (2) the inherent force that directs either the world or humans, and (3) the material world itself (including or excluding human beings). The various deconstructive movements of the 1990s have particularly latched on the interaction between these various functional definitions of nature (or rather, “nature”) and shown exhaustively how concepts of nature have been employed to exer-

2. Buell, *Environmental Imagination*, 285.

3. Ecocriticism is sometimes compared to Marxism and feminism, in that both describe fields of inquiry that go beyond the usual academic boundaries and encourage a political commitment. See Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 3–15 and 23–30; and Glotfelty, “Introduction,” xviii–xxiv.

4. I am thinking here, for instance, of de la Motte-Haber, *Musik und Natur*; Schleuning, *Die Sprache der Natur*; and Schmenner, *Die Pastorale*. I reviewed these books in “Eco-musicology.”

5. Williams, *Keywords*, 219.

cise argumentative and rhetorical authority. To invoke but the most obvious example of how musical nature has been employed in the service of an authoritative argument, the “chord of nature” (based on the harmonic series, usually in truncated form) was wielded by conservative music theorists and critics as an argumentative cudgel to demonstrate why nontonal music is misguided and unviable—in a word, that it would “fly in the face of nature.”<sup>6</sup> In this universalizing context, which conflates Williams’s three categories, nature functions as a delegitimizing strategy that simply allows no objection.

For a more benign use of such a rhetorical concept of nature, take the Swiss geographer Albert Heim, who measured the sounds of waterfalls in a scientific study of 1873. He found that the sound—a C-major chord with an added F—corresponded precisely to the sonority Beethoven had used at the beginning of the final movement of the Pastoral Symphony, following the musical depiction of a thunderstorm.<sup>7</sup> “It seems,” Heim concluded, “that Beethoven had got this chord from listening—consciously or unconsciously—to the sound of water, which flowed away in large swaths after his storm.”<sup>8</sup> Heim, too, effectively drew on a suggestive conflation of Williams’s categories of nature in order to valorize Beethoven’s music. With this series of experiments, whose veracity and scientific value are distinctly dubious, Heim drew attention to Beethoven’s compositional genius. His observations effectively served to show that in the Pastoral Symphony, Beethoven had quite literally given “nature’s rule to art,” as the Kantian genius concept famously demanded.

While the deconstructive movement has greatly advanced our understanding of rhetoric and authority surrounding the term nature, it is often in direct conflict with specific ecological aims. From its skeptical post-structuralist vantage point, which centers on language as a site of conflict, it is all too easy to dismiss “nature” as a discursive construct: “nature”—in the scariest of scarequotes—here emerges as yet another grand narrative that is in need of deconstruction.<sup>9</sup> In such deconstructive maneuvers, the step from identifying nature as a cultural construct to dismissing it as “just” a cultural construct is but a small one. There is thus a genuine danger that the deconstructive approach may enter into contradiction with the very real urgency of the issues expressed by the ecological movement. In the face of these complications, the feminist philosopher Kate Soper—who is acutely aware of both strengths and limitations of deconstruction—sighed in exasperation: “It is not language that has a hole in its ozone layer.”<sup>10</sup>

6. This is obviously just a crude reductionist form of this argument. The essays in Clark and Rehding, eds., *Music Theory and Natural Order* explore wider-ranging conceptions of nature within the discourses of music theory.

7. Heim, “Töne der Wasserfälle,” 209–14.

8. Ibid., 213.

9. See Coates, *Nature*, 184–86.

10. Soper, *What is Nature?*, 151. The ecological movement has always had an ambivalent relationship with science. While the scientific revolution brought about the “death” of nature as a

These limitations of academic activism are quite closely related to the challenges that ecomusicology faces. For the uses of “nature” in which these recent studies have been primarily interested tend to range from the obviously ideological, as in our first example, which falsely universalized the “chord of nature,” to well-intentioned attempts to gild the lily, such as we encountered in the second example. Both examples are in urgent need of deconstruction—which, however, will likely undermine any sense of real-world crisis that we may hope to engender with such work. The biggest challenge ecomusicology will have to address is how to bridge that gap. How can music studies respond to the sense of crisis in a way that would be comparable to the other arts? Or, to invoke Daniel Grimley’s felicitous expression, how do you articulate the exhortation “Listen, or else . . .” most effectively?<sup>11</sup> Quite possibly an answer will be forthcoming from a widening outlook on the objects under discussion, starting with a critical examination not only of what we mean by “nature” but also of what we mean by “music.”<sup>12</sup>

Non-Western musical traditions and sound art, in a post-Cagean universe, hold considerable potential in this regard, as does the pioneering work in sound studies that has exploded traditional notions of music and musicological enterprise. I am thinking here particularly of Stephen Feld’s approach to soundscapes and Suzanne Cusick’s important work on music and torture, as instructive examples of how musicology and raising awareness can be brought together productively. While the contents of these researches are not immediately related to ecocritical concerns, important parallels can be made to the wider social and political intervention that such a project facilitates.

But if the apocalyptic vision is perhaps not the straightest arrow in ecomusicology’s quiver, what about other ways to approach ecological topics in music? One fruitful dimension is to appeal to the power of memory, which is one area in which music is known to excel. The nostalgic imagination has always been a large part of the appeal of the environmental movement: on the political level, Green parties were long difficult to classify on the traditional left-right spectrum, since despite their progressive politics, a conservative streak—in all senses—often ran through them, which was fed by a romantic idea of a simpler, holistic past.<sup>13</sup>

---

supernatural, feminine figure, and exposed her body to the scientist’s gaze, as Merchant has argued in *The Death of Nature*, the urgency of climate change has forged a new alliance between the two sides.

11. From the discussion at the 2008 AMS panel “Ecocriticism and Musicology” (transcript available at [www.ams-esg.org](http://www.ams-esg.org)). In *The Book of Music and Nature*, editors David Rothenberg and Martha Ulvaeus aim to develop an ecological notion of listening.

12. Allen expands the purview of musicological inquiry significantly in “‘Fatto di Fiemme,’” in which he pursues the material basis of instrument making and its environmental costs.

13. Prince Charles may be the most prominent proponent of such ideas.

In this domain, no work has been more influential than Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory* (1996). It is not for nothing that Schama opens his monumental reflection on the cultural and epistemological significance of landscape with a childhood reflection. Schama and others have noted the irony that landscapes require human interference in the form of constant maintenance in order to be able to exude their iconic appearance of autonomy, timelessness, and purity.<sup>14</sup> But Schama urges us not to stop there:

It is not to deny the seriousness of our ecological predicament, nor to dismiss the urgency with which it needs repair and redress, to wonder whether, in fact, a new set of myths are what the doctor should order as a cure for our ills. What about the old ones? For notwithstanding the assumption, commonly asserted in these texts, that Western culture has evolved by sloughing off its nature myths, they have, in fact, never gone away. For if, as we have seen, our entire landscape tradition is the product of shared culture, it is by the same token a tradition built from a rich deposit of myths, memories, and obsessions. The cults which we are told to seek in other native cultures—of the primitive forest, of the river of life, of the sacred mountain—are in fact alive and well and all about us if only we know where to look for them.<sup>15</sup>

Schama does not set nature and culture in opposition but regards them as building on one another. In this way, Schama productively harnesses a sense of nostalgia, and ultimately of cultural memory, under an ecological banner. His project is best understood as an adaptation of the complex temporality of cultural memory, carried out with immaculate logic, whereby we remember the greatness of the past with an urgent ethical imperative to preserve and perpetuate it for future generations.<sup>16</sup> In Schama's adaptation, in marveling at landscapes as an integral part of our cultural identities, we begin to understand how much else we stand to lose if those landscapes disappear.

Music scholars have explored the significance of soundscapes in the formation of cultural identities.<sup>17</sup> Among ecological topics, nostalgia is the quieter sister of the attention-seeking apocalypse. Adaptations of such models, which enlist the commemorative and community-building powers of music in the service of ecological approaches, offer exciting prospects.<sup>18</sup> To be sure, there is

14. See, for instance, Radkau, "Wordy Worship of Nature."

15. Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 14.

16. Nora's enormously influential concept of the *lieu de mémoire* (site of memory) must be mentioned here. See his "Between Memory and History."

17. Originally coined by R. Murray Schafer in the 1960s (see his *New Soundscape*), the notion of soundscape has proved very productive in musicological scholarship. Initially explored by ethnomusicologists and anthropologists, above all Steven Feld, this concept is now meeting with increased interest in historical musicology. See for instance, Von Glahn, *Sounds of Place*; Toliver, "Eco-ing in the Canyon"; and Grimley, *Grieg*.

18. See for instance, Ingram, "'My Dirty Stream' "; and Pedelty, "Woody Guthrie and the Columbia River." Moreover, a group of interdisciplinary researchers has recently added a historical dimension to the notion of the soundscape, under the title of *Acoustic Environments in Change*, by Järveluoma et al.

a certain danger of regressing into sentimentalizing and romantic nature-worship. This can probably best be held at bay by not keeping the critical and political angles of ecomusicology out of sight for too long.

In his famous *Essay on the Origin of Languages* Rousseau adopted a Montesquieu-inspired approach to cultures as based on climate, and argued that northern languages arose out of a sense of harsh necessity, whereas southern languages emerged from a sense of love and abundance. Rousseau coined a pair of soundbites to contrast their respective essences: *Aidez-moi* (help me!) vs. *Aimez-moi* (love me!). With the two fundamentally different approaches—alarmist, dystopian apocalypse vs. nostalgic, utopian cultural memory—it seems that Rousseau unwittingly described the two fundamental ways in which we envoice the environment in ecocritical studies. Many in the narrative arts have taken the attention-grabbing apocalyptic route to raise awareness by instilling a sense of acute crisis in its audiences. It is quite possible that the most productive way forward for ecomusicology will be to follow the alternative route.

## Prospects and Problems for Ecomusicology in Confronting a Crisis of Culture

AARON S. ALLEN

The environmental crisis is not only the fault of failed engineering, bad science, ecological misunderstanding, poor accounting, and bitter politics. It is also a failure of holistic problem solving, interpersonal relations, ethics, imagination, and creativity. In short, the environmental crisis is a failure of culture.<sup>1</sup> Humanist academics (particularly philosophers, literary scholars, and historians) work to understand the people, cultures, and ethical situations that created, perpetuate, attempt to solve, and face this crisis. In that context, musicologists have perspectives and insights to offer, especially because of the ubiquity of music, the importance that most people accord to it, and the communicative and emotional powers associated with music and the communities who make, enjoy, and consume it. There are good prospects for ecomusicology to contribute to the larger humanistic endeavor of understanding and addressing this crisis of culture, but such possibilities are tempered by problems and challenges. Although a longer list deserves to be enumerated, and

1. Donald Worster was an early exponent of this now largely common understanding. He acknowledges the many accomplishments of science in understanding the scope and problems of the environmental crisis (*Wealth of Nature*, 27), but goes on to say that scientists have failed to understand the “why” questions, which are rooted in culture: “Natural science cannot by itself fathom the sources of the crisis it has identified, for the sources lie not in the nature that scientists study but in the *human nature* and, especially, in the *human culture* that historians and other humanists have made their study.”